

Peekskill, NY – U.S. Rep. John Hall (D-NY19) met with area veterans today to receive feedback on a draft of a major veterans bill he is working on to overhaul the disability claims processing system of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Hall's legislation would be an historic change in the way the VA handles disability claims. On Saturday, Hall held similar discussions with veterans in Beacon and Goshen. "Over the last year, dozens of veterans have contacted my office seeking help with their long-overdue claims," said Congressman Hall. "Their experiences have made me see how the veterans claim process is failing America's veterans, and I am proposing legislation to finally get it back on track."

Currently, over 600,000 veterans' claims for disability assistance are languishing in the VA's backlog. The average wait time for a veteran's claim to be processed is almost six months. Hall visited the VA's New York Regional Office in March to see the claims process firsthand. In his role as Chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs, Hall has held a series of hearings in Washington, DC, and a field hearing on October 8, 2007, in New Windsor, NY, about the unacceptable claims backlog and the problems that veterans face because of it. After hearing from veterans during these hearings and also from veterans requesting assistance with their own backlogged cases, Hall decided to write legislation to overhaul the VA's system for processing disability claims.

"It is unconscionable that we ask the men and women of our Armed Forces to be ready to defend America at a moment's notice, and then force them to wait months to receive the assistance they've earned through service and sacrifice," said Hall. "A veteran remains a soldier when he comes home, and he deserves the same commitment and support as the day when he promised to fight for his country."

Hall's proposed legislation would update several key aspects of the VA's outdated disability claims process to reflect today's medical conditions and diagnoses, make progress toward eliminating the unnecessary backlog, make it easier for veterans to begin receiving benefits earlier in the review process, and make other improvements.

"I wanted to meet with veterans to hear directly from them about their ideas on how to improve the VA's claims system," said Hall. "I'm going to incorporate their suggestions, comments, and experiences into the legislation I'm working to pass in Congress."

The House Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs is scheduled to hold a legislative hearing on Hall's bill April 10th, followed by a Subcommittee markup on the 17th.

Hall dedicated the work on his bill to Rockland County Vietnam veteran Ted Wolf who passed away last month. Mr. Wolf called Hall's Goshen office for help a year ago, last January on the day the office opened. Mr. Wolf, who was diagnosed with terminal prostate cancer from exposure to Agent Orange during the Vietnam War, had been waiting since June of 2006 for a ruling from the VA on his request for an increase in disability benefits. Congressman Hall was able to intercede on Mr. Wolf's behalf to obtain a ruling from the VA. Mr. Wolf received increased monthly benefits as well as a retroactive check.

"Ted Wolf's case certainly took my immediate notice, but the dozens that have followed since then indicate a much greater problem in need of a legislative solution," stated Hall.

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